

DIEHARDS

WHY FANS CARE SO MUCH ABOUT SPORTS

CHIP SCARINZI

Foreword by JOSH PAHIGIAN



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FOREWORD

Why do sports captivate and thrill us? Why do we pour so much of ourselves into the experience of watching adults play the games we loved as children? I've wondered about this for some time.

I still remember the day my curiosity regarding the nature of fandom first arose. My eighth grade history teacher, Mr. Mayotte, pulled me aside one morning to ask what sort of grade I thought I could get in his class if I spent half the time studying that I devoted to baseball. After I muttered a lame reply, he asked *why* I cared so much about the sport. On Fridays, he led us in a game of current affairs trivia. Over the course of several weeks, he had noticed my near-encyclopedic knowledge of the game. I still remember the question that prompted our chat that morning: "Who did the Red Sox trade to get new pitcher Lee Smith?"

As was usually the case when a question from the sports category came up, mine was the first hand in the air.

"The Sox traded two guys for Lee Arthur Smith," I answered. "Calvin Schiraldi and Al Nipper."

Mayotte nodded. "And how are they doing?" he asked.

"Schiraldi's 3-2 with a 4.50 ERA," I sputtered. "Nipper's 1-2 with an ERA in the 2.00s."

There were two things about Shepherd Hill Junior High School that made me eager to climb onto the bus each morning: the promise of baseball practice at the end of the day and the racks of hanging newspapers in

the library – the sports pages that I would read through during study hall.

When adults asked what I planned to do when I grew up, I would give the same answer I'd been reciting since attending my first game at Fenway Park in 1982, which just so happened to be a walk-off win in twelve innings, thank you very much Gary Allenson. I was going to play third base for the Boston Red Sox. I was the kid who shoveled snow from the lawn in February so I could throw balls against a strike zone chalked onto the chimney; the kid who ran a fantasy baseball league, figuring out the standings the old-fashioned way, with a calculator and pencil when USA Today ran the league-wide stats on Tuesday; the kid who got an Easter basket full of Topps wax packs every year; the kid who mailed letters to players stuffed with self-addressed and stamped envelopes in hopes of a reply; the kid who used a wooden bat in Little League.

I have been a diehard for as long as I can remember. But that doesn't make me unique. There are millions like me, following different teams in different sports in different countries. But why? Why do we stake so much of our happiness on the bounce of a ball?

My first taste of alcohol came from a champagne bottle my father had been saving since the Red Sox lost to the Reds in the 1975 World Series. I brought the glass to my lips on an October night in 1986, minutes before a groundball would trickle through a first baseman's legs and into my nightmares. Naturally, I blamed my father when the Red Sox fell to the Mets in Game Seven two nights later. He should have known better than to toast victory before the final out.

At some point, of course, my dream of playing in the big leagues yielded to reality's harsh light. A .223 batting average on your J.V. baseball team will do that, especially when you're the guy keeping the team stat book. A couple

years later, when it came time to pick a college, proximity to Fenway Park played a primary role in my decision.

I attended every Opening Day at Fenway through my undergrad and grad school years, even after the gut-kick of the 1994 work stoppage had prompted me to send several angry letters to Commissioner Bud Selig, one of which garnered a reply that began, “Dear Josh. Thank you for your letter and for your passion for the game, although I take great exception to your language and use of sarcasm...” I bought a standing room ticket whenever Pedro Martinez was pitching, and on days when those tickets sold out, I handed a folded \$20 bill to an usher who would let me pass through his turnstile. I routinely entered the park the minute the gates opened, so I could watch batting practice and interact with the players as they shagged balls. I waited outside the players’ parking lot after big wins to cheer my favorites as they headed home.

For four years of grad school I lived close enough to Fenway to walk to games, which I often did with my girlfriend (now wife) Heather beside me. On any given night, we might experience the joy of watching a Shea Hillenbrand homer sail over the left field wall to lift the Red Sox to an 18-inning win over the Tigers, or the indignity of sitting through the latter innings of a 22-1 loss to the dreaded Yankees. To this day, I have never left a ballpark early. There’s no clock in baseball, and a comeback is always possible. And besides, I just love being at the ballpark, no matter the score, weather, or time of day.

Sometimes with Heather and other times with friends, I began embarking on baseball trips, exploring the major and minor league offerings along the East Coast. I discovered much to love about the other ballparks too, and realized I had a lot in common with other teams’ fans, even if our rooting interests diverged.

FOREWORD

Approaching the end of a graduate program in creative writing and with the real world looming, I wrote a wing-and-a-prayer book proposal with a friend and fellow devotee of the game. Finding a publisher seemed as unlikely as witnessing a no-hitter or inside-the-park home run. But amazingly we found an editor willing to front us the cash to visit all thirty big league parks and write a book about an epic baseball adventure shared by two friends. It turned out we had the right idea at the right time. Several new ballparks had just opened and a certain “priceless” credit card commercial had hit the airwaves romanticizing the idea of a summer spent in pursuit of baseball nirvana. *The Ultimate Baseball Road Trip* connected with fellow lovers of the game, and I had found my niche as a baseball travel writer.

So, back to Mr. Mayotte, eighth grade history, and the question of why I care so much. The only answer I could muster then was, “Because I love baseball.”

“It’s just a game,” he replied.

Of course, he was right. But I loved it so damned much. I wished there were some way to transfer to him the joy of a bat in your hands making solid contact with a ball, or of an improbable come-from-behind win for your team, or of watching a center fielder lay out for a diving catch, or of emerging from Kenmore Square and getting that first whiff of sausages, peppers, and onions frying behind the Green Monster. Why did those small miracles appeal to me in a way they evidently didn’t to him?

Flash-forward 30 years... and those joys, simple as they may be, still entrance me. But why?

I can’t answer this for every fan, but after reading the book you hold in your hands, I am better able to articulate my own reasons for caring so deeply about the game I love and the team I cheer. Baseball has been one of the few constants in my life. Throughout the carefree days of

childhood, the uncomfortable years of adolescence, the anxiety of early adulthood, the excitement of starting a married life, the pursuit of making a living, the responsibility of being a father, and every other phase of life, baseball has been there. Other interests have come and gone... ice fishing, what was I thinking? Close friends have scattered to far corners of the country and world. I've held several jobs in addition to my career as a baseball writer. Like most people, I have lived a life of constant adjustment to new realities and new responsibilities. But the promise of tomorrow's game or of Opening Day has always been present, carrying me through the darkest of nights and coldest of winters. My identity as "baseball lover" has remained. Baseball is my anchor amid life's sea of uncertainty.

Through this fine book – that is as lively and humorous as it is well researched and insightful – Chip Scarinzi has brought me to a deeper understanding of my own obsession. The author does a remarkable job deconstructing the excitement, joy, frustration, heartbreak, and range of other emotions sports bring into our lives. Reading this book will bring you closer to being able to put to words the feelings in your own heart for the team(s) you love. The author deftly weaves accounts of his own first-hand experiences as fan with those of other fanatics, while incorporating the insight gleaned from experts in anthropology, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, religion and other fields to explore and analyze sports' hold over us. I hope you enjoy this richly layered book as much as I did. And I hope you continue to find in the experience of rooting for your team(s) whatever it is that sports offer you.

Josh Pahigian

Author of *The Ultimate Baseball Road Trip* and
101 Baseball Places to See Before You Strike Out

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BASEBALL HEAVEN

St. Louis is a quiet city, a sprawl of brick buildings and little green parks nestled within the even broader sprawl of St. Louis County. The Gateway to the West, boasting one of the country's most beautiful architectural wonders in the Gateway Arch, offers little in the way of the block-to-block entertainment you might find in other major cities and even less in terms of casual interaction with other people within the arteries of its downtown community. There is a dearth of things to do here, St. Louis lifer and board member of the St. Louis Browns Historical Society Emmett McAuliffe had told me once. I would wager that, if one were so inclined, one might walk straight from the muddy banks of the Mississippi River right through the heart of the city without making contact with another living soul. I say this with confidence because that is precisely what I did one sticky summer night during a tour through Missouri's great baseball cities. Indeed, for all it might want for action in other facets of life, St. Louis is nothing if not a great baseball city.

There was a time when St. Louis sat among the nation's most important cities in terms of a bustling populace, industrial firepower, and straight up action. During this era, St. Louis also served as the key chess move during strategic planning for the Major League Baseball's American League, which was a fledgling professional baseball

organization built to contend head-to-head with the still young National League. At the turn of the 20th century, American League founder Ban Johnson began to cobble his league together by transforming a Milwaukee-based team from the Western League into the St. Louis Browns. This would be the first in a series of strategic decisions made to ensure the composition of a new league had a stronghold in all of the nation's most important cities. The Orioles moved to New York to become the fabled Yankees. Funny enough, the Browns would relocate to Baltimore 50 years later to create the Orioles all over again and to this day, the Orioles hardly acknowledge their Midwestern roots. The Athletics emerged as perennial contenders in North Philadelphia. In Boston, Red Sox Nation would begin their rise to icon status as the Boston Americans. Johnson continued to fill in the gaps here and there, but these were the key moves. Four teams in America's four most impressive cities. The crown jewel of the "Show Me" state, St. Louis, launched into a new century with enough momentum to support two professional baseball teams. Of course St. Louis needed two pro ball clubs – how could it not?

Unfortunately, not all superpowers stand the test of time and St. Louis' status, along with its population, suffered one gut punch after another as the years rolled along. Following World War II, the city endured a long, slow decline similarly damaging to what its Rust Belt brethren felt during that same period, and watched its population slip away since its peak somewhere north of 850,000 in the 1950s. Today, slightly more than 300,000 people call the city home – not enough to crack the nation's top 50 cities, and a long fall from the days when St. Louis served as a vital cog of America's growth as a nation.

To put the city's precipitous population dip into context, the 2010 U.S. Census counted a massive migration of

nearly 30,000 residents out of St. Louis across the previous 10-year period – an eight percent slip. Local politicians and city leaders point to myriad reasons for the decline. I find it hard to believe that a single, isolated cause accounts for a dip so significant. Rather, some combination of factors has led some 500,000 people to make their way somewhere else – anywhere else. Some point to a slow-to-recover local economy while others speculate about the impact of a broad desire among residents to move closer to jobs outside of the city. Then, questions emerged briefly about “white flight.” The broader county of St. Louis, while losing 10 percent of its white population, increased its black population by 21 percent. More telling, in my estimation, is the disappearance of more than 22,000 young people under the age of 17 during those 10 years – representing more than 75 percent of the mass exodus. On the surface, this serves as a damning indictment of the city’s school system. In some ways, however, we have stepped back in time: the streets of St. Louis, while contemporized for the modern world, boast a populace tally closer to post-Civil War times than mid-20th century boom times.

Amid this startling decline, however, remained the beating heart at the city’s core that for more than a century pumped life and energy into an otherwise sleepy town. St. Louis, once a dynamic, two-team city and now host city to the Cardinals exclusively, is Baseball Heaven.

When Jim Edmonds, a centerfielder who made a name for himself with the Cardinals in the early 2000s, joined the team at the turn of the 21st century, slugger Mark McGwire greeted his new teammate with a phone call and a cry of, “Welcome to Baseball Heaven!” It’s different here, McGwire assured his new teammate. On that spring day, he was not the first to make that association. For years, fans and players alike have proudly proclaimed this modest city with a waning population and deafeningly

quiet neighborhoods the center of the baseball universe. So we must ask the question: is it?

“St. Louis fans are some of the most passionate baseball fans I’ve seen in all of the sport. I’ve been to several games in St. Louis, but there was one particular experience that really brought it home for me,” said Bob Kendrick, President of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, an absolute gem in Kansas City, located some 250 miles west. “The late, great Buck O’Neil and I were going down to St. Louis for an event with the Cardinals and we were there on a Thursday get-away day Businessman’s Special where they were playing the Cincinnati Reds. At that time, Ken Griffey was still on the team, but the Reds were not really a good team and yet 35,000 people were at the ballpark that day. For a Businessman’s Special on get-away day that cemented in my mind what a great baseball town this is.”

The Miami Marlins, discussed in an earlier chapter, dream about one day enjoying the ticket office success of the St. Louis Cardinals. In 1997, the Cardinals lost 89 games while drawing 2.6 million fans through its turnstiles. Two years later, they finished 21.5 games out of first place and still drew 3.2 million. The team has not drawn less than 2 million fans in a season not impacted by labor disputes since 1980. To be clear, the Cardinals have typically produced winning ball clubs, but unlike many other cities, winning is not the only recipe for box office success. Of course, it would be wildly superficial to crown Cardinals fans as the best fans in baseball simply because they show up. The Los Angeles Dodgers typically outdraw the Cardinals, but more people would be inclined to identify Dodgers fans as late to arrive and early to leave than they would label them the game’s best support system for our million-dollar heroes on the playing field (you can make a strong argument that Dodgers fans get a bad rap).



CHIP SCARINZI is an award-winning communications executive by trade and a dyed-in-the-wool baseball fan at heart. A lifelong Philadelphia sports fan, he lives with his wife and two young daughters in the shadow of the O.co Coliseum in nearby Alameda, Calif. *Diehards* is the manifestation of his own passion for sports and a desire to understand why he and his tribe care so much about games. He is an Athletics season ticket holder, member of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) and spends most of his free time at the ballpark.